

TRACES

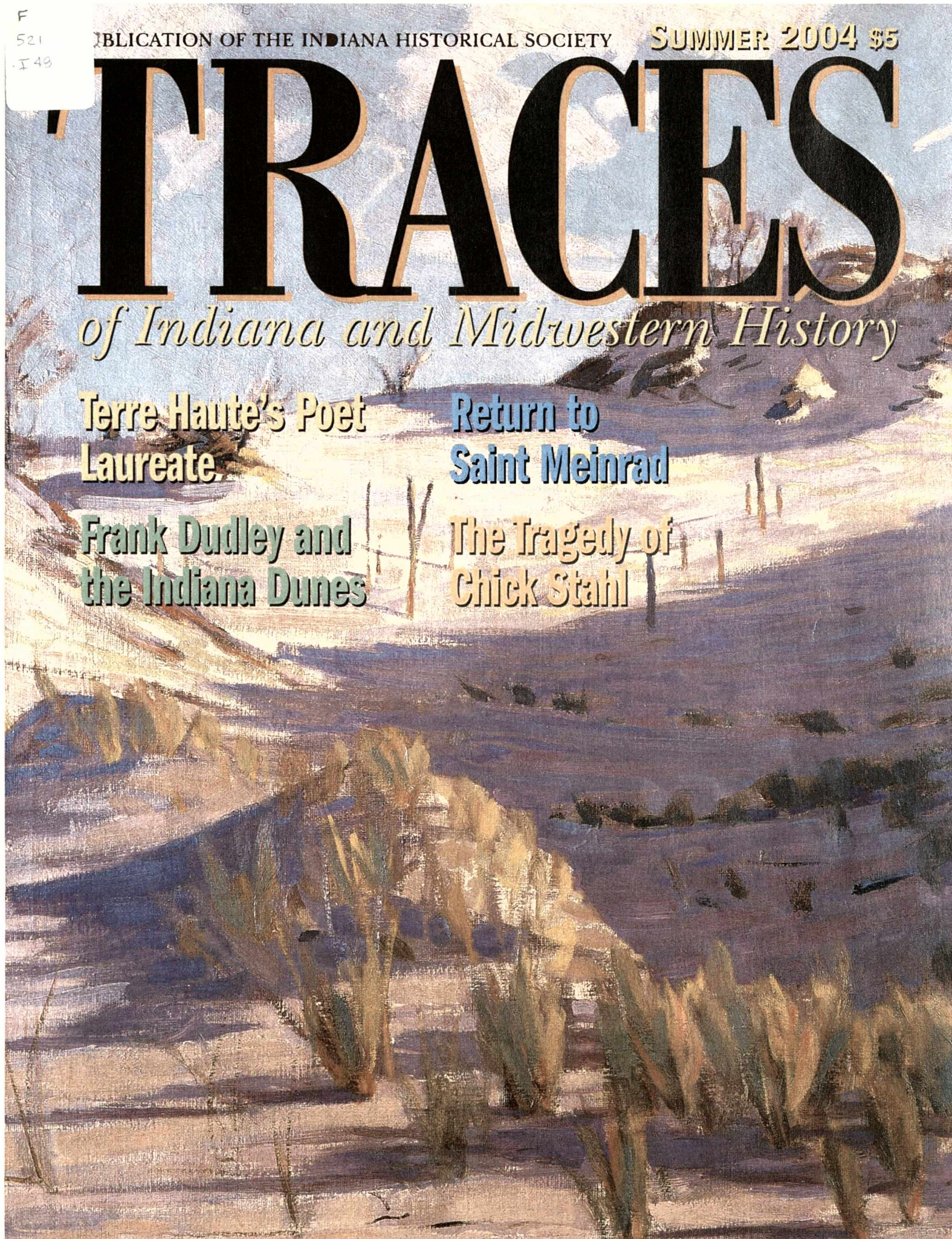
of Indiana and Midwestern History

Terre Haute's Poet
Laureate.

Return to
Saint Meinrad

Frank Dudley and
the Indiana Dunes

The Tragedy of
Chick Stahl



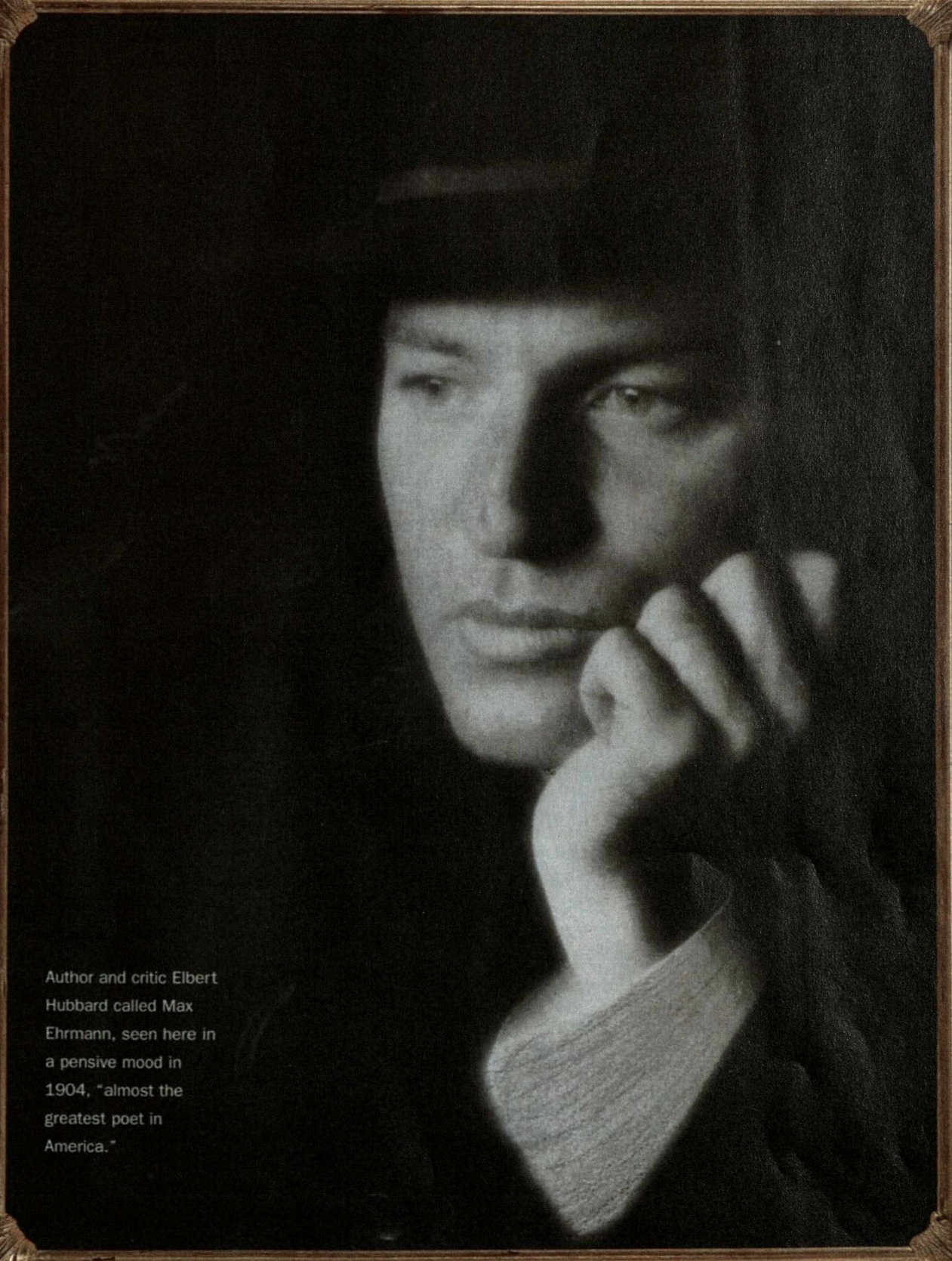
MAX EH RMANN

E

"If, in an honor of noble elation, I could write a bit of glorified prose that would soften the stern ways of life, and bring to our fevered days some courage, dignity and poise—I should be well-content." —MAX EH RMANN

TERRE HAUTE'S
Poet, Prophet,
and Philosopher

FRED D. CAVINDER



Author and critic Elbert
Hubbard called Max
Ehrmann, seen here in
a pensive mood in
1904, "almost the
greatest poet in
America."

II

HE ALMOST BECAME INDIANA'S FORGOTTEN POET.

Max Ehrmann was a well-known and -liked author in his native Terre Haute, where he lived his seventy-three years, rejecting the lure of bigger cities. But events conspired in the 1960s, more than fifteen years after his death, to threaten one of his best works with oblivion.

Even today some mistakenly believe that *Desiderata* was found on the wall of a Baltimore church in 1692 and now belongs to the ages. In fact, Ehrmann wrote *Desiderata*, a prose poem reflecting his outlook on life, in 1927. It was among twenty-two books and pamphlets he wrote during his career, after his graduation from DePauw University in 1894 until his death in 1945. Yet much of his life was spent deceiving the outside world that he valued law and business above poetry. "I soon found that I must pretend to be writing for money," he wrote, "and what is more, create the impression that I am making it."

Desiderata joins *A Prayer* as a hallmark of Ehrmann's output. Like *Desiderata*'s false emergence as a church-wall discovery, *A Prayer* also had a dramatic existence. It was written in Columbia, South Carolina, where he was recovering from typhoid fever. Music from a nearby dance produced a mood of loneliness in the poet and he rose from his sickbed to write it. A friend rescued the prose poem after Ehrmann discarded it, and it was published in 1903.

In 1904 *A Prayer* was displayed along with James Whitcomb Riley's *When the Frost Is on the Punkin* in the Indiana building at the Saint Louis World's Fair. When *A Prayer* was stolen from its place of exhibition, it received widespread publicity. It was printed in the *Congressional*



DEPAUW UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Ehrmann while a student at DePauw University. During his days at the Greencastle, Indiana, institution, Ehrmann served as editor of the campus newspaper and engaged in a variety of activities with the Delta Tau Delta fraternity.

Record in 1909 and has been translated into thirty-three languages and set to music. In 1908 a Chicago judge gave a copy to everyone convicted in his court.

Desiderata also has been used in hundreds of ways. It has appeared on everything from placards to aprons (mostly before its real origin was established) and has been common on Christmas cards. Adlai Stevenson was preparing to reproduce it on his cards before his death in 1965. It appeared in *Reader's Digest*, science-fiction magazines, and on the cover of a national Methodist church magazine. In 1971 radio and television personality Les Crane made a recording of the poem with a gospel-soul musical background; it reached the number-eight position on the Billboard charts in December that year and won a Grammy for best spoken-word recording.

How *Desiderata* was mistakenly attributed to 1692 is mysterious. In the late 1950s the Reverend Frederick Ward Kates, rector of Old Saint Paul's Church in Baltimore, included the poem in a booklet of inspirational works, crediting Ehrmann. Parishioners evidently began using the poem, printing it on cards to pass around to friends. Eventually people began asking the church about the poem, and the legend grew that it had been found on the wall years ago. Among those who inquired was Herbert A. Kenny, a book editor with the *Boston Globe*. He verified Ehrmann's authorship.

Desiderata and *A Prayer* are somewhat parallel in their sentiments. Both urge a calm and peaceful life, rejecting bitterness and embracing thankfulness. "May I not forget that poverty and riches are of the spirit," says *A Prayer*. "Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and

remember what peace there may be in silence," advises *Desiderata*, concluding with "Be cheerful. Strive to be happy." A reviewer once said, "*Desiderata* stands at the very head of devotional literature."

Ehrmann considered *A Prayer* the "most effective bit of work that I ever have done." And *Desiderata* was personally significant. He noted in his journal on January 1, 1936, "'Desiderata' shall be my guide. I wrote it for myself. It counsels those virtues I felt myself most in need of. To travel on serenely, doing one's duty and responding honestly to each day's problems is the right attitude."

It is safe to say that today *Desiderata* and *A Prayer* are the only principal works for which Ehrmann is remembered. In a sense Ehrmann was a candidate to be forgotten. By all accounts, he was a man who lived austere and simply. He never wanted fame or money, associates said. He shunned publicity and did not care for material things, concentrating instead on matters of philosophy and the soul. Ehrmann strove to interpret the thoughts and longings of the average man and woman and was, in

the view of many, successful in translating them into his prose and poetry. Yet today the only building still standing from his childhood in Terre Haute is the former German Methodist church where he took catechism on Saturday afternoons. The site of his birthplace is a parking lot without any reference to the poet.

Ehrmann's first work, before he realized he could not make a living writing, was *A Farrago* in 1898, a collection of writings about life at Harvard University that appeared in Boston newspapers. He also wrote plays, including *The Light of the Sun*, *The Wife of Marobius*, and *Jesus: A Passion Play*. The latter portrayed those involved in the crucifixion in a realistic manner and suggested that Jesus was spirited away from the tomb and buried in a secret place. It drew widespread praise but also strong criticism, with one editor of a religious journal refusing to review

the play, calling it blasphemous. Ehrmann also contributed to a number of periodicals such as *Drama*, *Caxton's Woman's Journal*, *Progressive Magazine*, *Outlook*, *Physical Culture*, *Educator and Birth Control Review*, and *Twentieth Century Magazine*. One critic termed Ehrmann's work as "prose that is truly poetry."

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So who was this Hoosier poet fame has forgotten? Ehrmann's life was remarkable in that he never lost his philosophical desire to see the world in its best light. Although he always lamented widespread crassness, he constantly hoped for increased civilization. He never forsook nature as a setting for seeking peace. His journal, which he kept from 1917 to 1936, concluded with a

thumbnail of his creed: "Simplicity, sincerity and serenity." Yet the Max Ehrmann outside of his books, outside the deep-thought ramblings of his journal, is elusive. The journal, as published in 1952 by his late-in-life wife Bertha Pratt King Ehrmann, gives scant attention to his private



DUPONT UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Ehrmann described his father, Maximilian, as a "diligent, loving father and he did all in his power to show us the true path of life—industry, honor, and the forward look." The poet called his mother, Margaret, a "sweet-tempered woman."

life. Even the names of his visiting friends are disguised with initials. He doesn't name professors he commonly lunched with at Indiana State University (known in his lifetime as Indiana State Normal School and later Indiana State Teachers College). He never mentions his toupee (made from his own hair), his gold-headed walking cane, the dressing gown he wore in his apartment, or his sources of income.

Ehrmann's philosophical demeanor and style, described as "intellectual and middle-class Bohemian," appear to have been infectious. Friends seemingly became philosophical too, eschewing chitchat, as far as written evidence shows. Few criticized him. A friend for forty years, who characterized Ehrmann as modest and refined, once asked the poet to summarize his philosophy. "That would be difficult," Ehrmann is reported to have replied. "But I can say, the world is beautiful and abundant."



DEPAUW UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Ehrmann poses with DePauw alumni at a reunion. Throughout his lifetime, Ehrmann considered DePauw his "spiritual home" and later wrote that at the university he "contacted a disease which I have never shaken off. The disease was Idealism."

DESIDERATA

MAX EHLMANN

*GO PLACIDLY amid the noise and haste,
and remember what peace there may
be in silence.*

*As far as possible without surrender
be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others,
even the dull and ignorant;
they too have their story.*

*Avoid LOUD and aggressive persons,
they are vexatious to the spirit.*

*If you compare yourself with others,
you may become bitter or vain,
for always there will be greater and
lesser persons than yourself.
Enjoy your achievements as well as
your plans.*

*KEEP INTERESTED in your own career,
however humble;
it is a real possession in the changing
fortunes of time.*

*Exercise caution in your business affairs;
for the world is full of trickery.*

*But let this not blind you to what
virtue there is;
many persons strive for high ideals;
and everywhere life is full of heroism.*

BE YOURSELF.

*Especially, do not feign affection.
Neither be cynical about love;
for in the face of all aridity and
disenchantment
it is perennial as the grass.*

*TAKE KINDLY the counsel of the years,
gracefully surrendering the things of
youth.*

*Nurture strength of spirit to shield
you in sudden misfortune.*

*But do not distress yourself with
imaginings.*

*Many fears are born of fatigue and
loneliness.*

*Beyond a wholesome discipline,
be gentle with yourself.*

*YOU ARE a child of the universe,
no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.
And whether or not it is clear to you,
no doubt the universe is unfolding as
it should.*

*Therefore be at peace with God,
whatever you conceive Him to be,
and whatever your labors and
aspirations,
in the noisy confusion of life keep
peace with your soul.*

*WITH ALL ITS sham, drudgery and
broken dreams,
it is still a beautiful world.
Be cheerful.
Strive to be happy.*

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What there is of sorrow and misery is not due to the gods but to the evil and ignorance of man. We are not fallen gods. We are rising brutes."

Ehrmann was born on September 26, 1872, one of five children of Maximilian and Margaret Ehrmann. From his grandfather on his mother's side, Christian Lutz of Marshall, Illinois, Max Ehrmann learned about the horrors of war, a theme he focused on in his future writing. A teacher named Louis Peters inspired him to read. As an adult, Ehrmann filled his rooms in Terre Haute with books, many of them philosophical volumes, some owned in multiple copies.

Ehrmann's father and his brother Charles opened a coal-mining business. They were successful for a time and created a town called Ehrmannedale, Indiana, which at one time had approximately a hundred homes. Over the years it disappeared; people moved away, buildings

fell to the decay of years. Max Ehrmann worked in the mine's offices, however, and it is thought his association with attorneys passing en route to the nearby Vigo County courthouse spurred his interest in the law.

Ehrmann's father died in 1893. At the time Max was studying at DePauw University, where he was sent by his brother Charles, who was a successful businessman and saw potential in the youth. At the university Ehrmann was a member of Delta Tau Delta fraternity and edited the *DePauw Weekly*. He had foreseen his own future in a letter to his mother in 1895, in which he mused, "I have hopes to be a writer of books . . . I believe some day I might write a good one."

Although Ehrmann had hoped to teach philosophy, he rejected a job offer because it required a Sunday sermon on a philosophical topic. Throughout his life he maintained a strong belief in God but an

ever-weakening belief in formal religion. He thought church teachings were outmoded. In conversations recorded in 1926, when he was established in Terre Haute as a philosopher and poet, he said, "I am out of joint with the church." He also noted, "I don't care for cathedrals. They are frowning monuments dedicated to dead ideas. The best thing I got out of church was the silence before the sermon began."

Thwarted at teaching, Ehrmann went to Harvard to study philosophy and law. There he began his writing, doing the series on campus life for the Boston newspapers. He roomed with Kendric Babcock, who later served as dean of the college of liberal arts at the University of Illinois. While at Harvard, Ehrmann edited the *Rainbow*, a national fraternity magazine, and served as president of the northern division of Delta Tau Delta.

Although already distraught at "the dog fight that is called business," as he said, he took a job as an attorney in the Vigo County prosecutor's office. He never quarreled with the need to earn a living, just the "brutal business world" it involved. "For two years I was a deputy states attorney, dealing daily with filthy minds and bodies; for the witnesses against criminals frequently are of the same class," he wrote. The court milieu did, however, spotlight for him the need for social reform, revealing how the "rabble" got that way. Perhaps motivated by that, he considered public office as a Democrat. Eventually he rejected politics for a poet's calling, becoming president of the Terre Haute Literary Club and giving a paper almost every year on a variety of subjects.

To escape the criminal environment, Ehrmann took a job as attorney and credit manager for his brothers' overall factory. His heart was not in it, but there were compensations. "Had it not been for some other enterprise of the mind in leisure hours, I should have died," Ehrmann wrote. He considered going to New York to write, but the turmoil of cities repulsed him. Likewise repulsive was the advice of one publisher: "Write just one novel to make a killing and then do your other work." Ehrmann eventually did write a novel, not for cash, but to express a philosophical idea. The novel was *A Fearsome Riddle*, published in 1901 by the Bowen-Merrill Company of Indianapolis. The book explored the theory that life must follow the principles of mathematics.

Ehrmann stored on a writing table created by his cabinetmaker father bits of philosophy that later appeared in *Desiderata*. In his home he was surrounded by books, busts of Dante and Shakespeare, and a bronze paperweight of Buddha. Here he began corresponding with Theodore Dreiser, a contemporary fel-

low Terre Hautean in whom he saw great writing promise. He did object, however, to Dreiser's portrayal of a murky, immoral world without any sunshine.

While at Harvard, Ehrmann had met Eugene V. Debs of Terre Haute, a rising star of socialism. Witnessing a speech Debs made at Harvard, Ehrmann became impressed with the socialist's ability to hold an audience spellbound for more than two hours. Later, Ehrmann and Debs became estranged. When World War I broke out, Debs opposed it; Ehrmann saw it as necessary, although he detested war. Matching his words with deed, Ehrmann worked on the draft-registration board throughout the war.

The poet had become settled in his hometown. By all accounts he was a familiar sight on city streets,

known to everyone from passing schoolchildren to Terre Haute's movers and shakers. Ehrmann was remembered as a short, stocky, powerfully built man. He usually wore a derby hat, carried a cane, and dressed well. Many of Ehrmann's acquaintances remembered him as "a real gentleman." Others considered him, in a kindly way, a delightful eccentric. Ehrmann traveled widely,

although he didn't always enjoy it—to New York in the fall, to Florida in the winter, and other times to French Lick, which he called the " Lourdes of Indiana." He also journeyed to a variety of cities for speeches and poetry readings. "I am washing myself clean," he said during one stay at Turkey Run State Park, "of the mental dust of the city."

Ehrmann had few illusions about his hometown—he once wrote of it as a "smoky, commercial city that has not one bit of bronze or marble for the public eye—yes, even here let me keep my eyes open, my feelings warm, my understanding keen." Still, his



PHOTOGRAPH BY CARL BEITING FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF INDIANA

After graduating from Harvard, Ehrmann wrote his mother that he hoped to become a writer. "I do not tell this to everybody," he wrote, "because thousands of others have the same hopes. But years will tell."

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fondness for the people of Terre Haute knew no bounds. "What would I do without the affection of my townspeople?" he wrote. "Several times in younger years I tried to live elsewhere; but always I came back." He knew the town well, perhaps from



his walks, which ranged anywhere from thirty to forty blocks. Always keen on the outdoors, Ehrmann engaged in such sporting activities as archery, skating, golfing, swimming, and tennis. "I must keep my animal exercised," he said.

Ehrmann sometimes wrote in the mornings at his table, but he often wrote in what he

In addition to writing, Ehrmann traveled throughout the country giving lectures and readings under the auspices of the Central Lyceum Bureau of Indianapolis.

called the "midnight silence." He also worked under beech trees in Terre Haute's Deming Park, listening to the "silent voice within." He once noted that maintaining his journal sometimes kept him from other writing. As he expressed it in a poem: "I somehow feel that I, poor fool, still do/ The work that's meant for me./ So on and on I write/ Into the night."

In the early 1900s something happened that would change Ehrmann's life: Bertha Pratt King came to Terre Haute. Born in Little Falls, New York, in 1879, King graduated from Smith College and in 1906 established a private school in Terre Haute that became known as the King Classical School. She tutored all grades from kindergarten to high school and sent many boys and girls to colleges and universities. The school, which was considered experimental in the use of small class sizes, individual instruction, and personal relationships, had an enrollment of about sixty students.

King and Ehrmann seem to have been kindred spirits. In the summer of 1913, King campaigned for woman's suffrage in Ohio and Wisconsin and the next two summers she lectured for Redpath Chautauquas. For six years before the outbreak of World War I, King con-

ducted Good English Week, supported by the *Terre Haute Star* and the English teachers of the city. She lectured for many years and wrote articles on civic, literary, and sociological problems for Terre Haute newspapers. In 1916 she published *Worth of a Girl*.

Ehrmann often expressed his strong belief in love, both platonic and physical, but his relationship with King is only conjecture. Mrs. William J. Manning, who remembered him from the late 1930s, reported that it was common on Sunday for Ehrmann to pick up King in his roadster, often headed for Deming Park for a picnic. Manning and her husband-to-be sometimes saw Ehrmann and King picnicking and practicing at the park's archery range.

The poet told friends that when he was young he could not support a wife. When he had acquired some financial security, Ehrmann said he thought he was too old to marry. Nevertheless, Ehrmann and King were wed on June 3, 1945. She closed her school at the same time. The marriage



was brief, however. Three months after the wedding, on September 9, Ehrmann died at Saint Anthony's Hospital. The community mourned its loss. A few months before his death, Ehrmann had been honored at Terre Haute's Swope Art Gallery by professors, musicians, scientists, artists, and friends. Commenting on the tribute, the *Terre Haute Tribune* noted: "Mr. Ehrmann has become a Terre Haute institution . . . and has brought cultural notice in this direction."

Ehrmann, at left, poses with two fellow Terre Haute writers. At right is newspaperman and news-service entrepreneur Robert Debs Heintz, and in the center is novelist Theodore Dreiser.

Ehrmann stored on a writing table created by his cabinetmaker father bits of philosophy that later appeared in Desiderata. In his home he was surrounded by books, busts of Dante and Shakespeare, and a bronze paperweight of Buddha.



DEPAUW UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS



After her husband's death, King spent the rest of her days compiling and publishing Ehrmann's poems and unpublished material, including three editions of his journal. The journal also provided much of the information King used in writing Ehrmann's 1951 biography, titled *A Poet's Life*, which robs the reader of insight into Ehrmann's personality. One suspects that King wanted to protect her and her husband's privacy. She comments in the book on what Ehrmann often said to her, but usually it is philosophical. "Both of us were deeply interested in the world in which we lived and in the work we did," wrote King. "He had his work; I had mine He gave me many wise words about life and young people which I passed on. His need for a quiet life and solitude for his work I understood; he understood my love for my little institution. We had each other." This is the closest King comes to a personal comment.

She also noted that on summer nights the two of them would often sit "on some high eminence, gazing in solemn silence upon the magnificent stretches of sky, watching the glorious pageant of the heavens.

A frequent visitor to DePauw, Ehrmann is shown here at a reunion (left) and a dinner with university faculty members (right).

The author received numerous honors from his alma mater. In 1938 the university asked him to write the commemorative ode for its centennial celebration and awarded him an honorary doctor of letters degree.

He often said to me: We may be of no importance in this universe or in the cosmos, but we know we are of importance to those whom we love and we may make ourselves of some importance to our own group and community."

King did assemble in the book telling comments from professors at Indiana State University, with whom Ehrmann often lunched and who considered him almost an honorary faculty member. Without exception they praised Ehrmann, even considering that they were responding to his widow. The poet's talk always was of ideas, they said, with intellectual honesty. His sincere smile and intense interest in natural science were hallmarks to his character.

King died on January 16, 1962. Before her death she donated a large amount of her husband's manuscripts and papers to the archives of the

Roy O. West Library at DePauw. Ehrmann material, most of it clippings, books, and some correspondence, is also in the collections of the Vigo County Public Library and the Vigo County Historical Society in Terre Haute. When King died, the copyright to Ehrmann's works passed to her nephew, Richmond J. Wight. In the 1970s Robert L. Bell of Boston's Crescendo Publishing purchased the rights.

Bell took the brunt of harsh criticism by those who thought *Desiderata* should be free for the using. Bell noted "a choice assortment of insulting letters accusing us of plagiarizing or of copying something that appeared in Saint Paul's Church in 1692." His firm, he said, gave free use of *Desiderata* to charitable institutions and had a low licensing fee for worthy use of the Ehrmann poems.

Although perhaps forgotten by many, Ehrmann's poetry continues to live on in his native Terre Haute. "He gave autographed copies to everyone who would stand still," said Dorothy J. Clark, the late secretary of the Vigo County Historical Society. She became an Indiana *Desiderata* expert. "I don't know how many people brought them [copies of the poem] in to show us they were autographed by Max," she told a reporter.

Clark's comments were part of a 1972 tribute that Terre Haute paid Ehrmann to mark the centennial of his birth. Dozens of Hoosiers wrote in 1972 their recollections of meeting Ehrmann. Some mentioned a comment he had made that changed their lives. Several wrote their own poems to honor Ehrmann. One woman recalled the thrill of adulthood she felt at the age of seven when Ehrmann, who often met her while she was going to school, tipped his derby and said hello. Others recalled how he gave audiences to many budding writers, bemoaning their lack of poetic technique, but applauding their "hubbling in the soul." A similar celebration marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of *Desiderata* in 2002.



VIGO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ABOVE: After many years of friendship, Ehrmann married Bertha Pratt King in June 1945, just a few months before his death.

RIGHT: Like another Indiana author, Maurice Thompson, Ehrmann enjoyed the sport of archery.



VIGO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Late in his life Ehrmann gave a self-appraisal, deeming his early works "nothing." He preferred his later writing, such as *Breaking Home Ties*, a book of poems, and the plays *The Wife of Marobius*, *Jesus: A Passion Play*, and *David and Bathsheba*. He also pondered his legacy: "May I not be ungrateful for the small public that reads and loves my writings. As time goes on, the number may increase. Perhaps even when I am dead, some browser in libraries will come upon me, and, seeing that I was not altogether unworthy, will resurrect me from the dust of things forgotten."

*Fred D. Cavinder is a former reporter and editor with the Indianapolis Star and is the author of the books *Amazing Tales from Indiana* and *More Amazing Tales from Indiana*. This is his first article for Traces.*

FOR FURTHER READING: Ehrmann, Bertha Pratt King. *Max Ehrmann: A Poet's Life*. Boston: Bruce Humphries, 1951. | Ehrmann, Bertha Pratt King, ed. *The Journal of Max Ehrmann*. Boston: Bruce Humphries, 1952. | Ehrmann, Max. *A Fearsome Riddle*. Indianapolis: Bowen-Merrill Company, 1901. | Shumaker, Arthur W. *A History of Indiana Literature*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1962.